Consciousness as Pure Passive Awareness: Insights and Implications

Author: Wei Lin Chen
Date: 2025-08-14 11:13:00 UTC

This document formalizes a minimalist evolutionary theory of consciousness: Consciousness is passive awareness whose evolutionary role is to highlight (tag) significant events for memory. It exerts no direct real-time control, but its outputs feed back to reshape unconscious processing over time ("participatory free will"). Ego is self-memory.

Nature of Consciousness

Consciousness is strictly passive awareness. It notices contents after unconscious filtering and selection cross a salience threshold. All computation—perception, valuation, retrieval, decision—is unconscious; consciousness only witnesses the results in real time.

Indirect Causal Influence via Feedback

Although passive in the moment, the fact that an event entered awareness supplies feedback to unconscious systems. This modifies learning rates, habit formation, and attentional priors. Thus consciousness acts as a delayed-influence trainer of the decision machinery.

Unconscious Processes and Threshold of Awareness

Filtering of sensory and cognitive signals is performed by unconscious circuits. Contents become conscious only after these preconscious filters deem them sufficiently significant. Consciousness is a spotlight, not a selector.

Memory Formation as Trace of Awareness

Awareness itself does not actively encode memory. Instead, conscious noticing triggers an unconscious recording mechanism; un-noticed events typically leave little explicit trace. Conscious awareness functions as a biological highlighting mechanism (a tag) for storage and later recall.

Ego as Self-Memory

The ego is an accumulation of self-referential memories and narratives. Ego death is the temporary unbinding of identification from this memory archive, leaving only passive awareness.

Consciousness and Memory Access

Retrieval, recognition, and reasoning are unconscious. Consciousness notices the results as they surface. Decisions and thoughts are experienced only after they have formed.

Participatory Free Will

Instantaneous free will is illusory (decisions arise unconsciously). Yet conscious noticing shapes future choices indirectly by training the unconscious system. This diachronic influence constitutes participatory free will.

Evolutionary Purpose of Consciousness

Consciousness evolved primarily to enhance memory formation by tagging salient events. This improved survival by preserving critical information for future behavior. Its advantage is indirect: better memory-guided adaptation, not direct control.

Implications for Artificial Intelligence

Absent biological survival pressures, AI gains no functional benefit from subjective awareness. Feedback loops can emulate unconscious functions; they do not instantiate passive awareness.

Ego Death Through Sustained Awareness

Sustained attention to bare awareness weakens identification with self-memory, producing temporary ego dissolution while awareness persists.

Related Work & Positioning

Related Work & Positioning Closest precedents link consciousness to memory but differ from this strict “passive highlighter” view:

• Budson, Richman & Kensinger (2022), *Consciousness as a Memory System* (Cognitive & Behavioral Neurology 35:263–297, doi:10.1097/WNN.0000000000000319): argues consciousness developed as part of episodic memory to flexibly recombine information. Overlaps on memory-central origin; differs in equating consciousness with the episodic memory system rather than a passive tagger.

• Blumenfeld (2021/2023), *Brain Mechanisms of Conscious Awareness: Detect, Pulse, Switch, and Wave* (The Neuroscientist, PMID:34632846): proposes that conscious perception precedes memory encoding (“temporal nexus where attention and memory meet”). Supports a pre-encoding “highlighting” stage but does not adopt strict passivity.

• Lacalli (2024), *The function(s) of consciousness: an evolutionary perspective* (Frontiers in Psychology, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1493423): considers memory as a candidate proximate function and explicitly suggests that consciousness may aid in tagging memories for later recall. Aligns closely with the “tagging” idea but not the full framework (passivity + indirect feedback + ego-as-memory + AI implications).

• Keppler (2020), *The Common Basis of Memory and Consciousness* (Frontiers in Psychology 10:2968): proposes shared mechanisms for declarative memory and conscious perception, not a tagging-specific evolutionary role.

• Emotional Tagging (e.g., Richter-Levin & Akirav, 2003): shows amygdala-driven tagging enhances consolidation under arousal; complements but does not equate consciousness with tagging.

Position: This theory—Consciousness as Biological Highlighting (Memory■Tagging Theory of Consciousness, MTC)—is distinct in combining (i) strict passivity/no real-time control, (ii) tagging-for-memory as the proximate evolutionary function, (iii) indirect feedback/participatory free will, (iv) ego-as-self■memory with operational ego■death, and (v) explicit AI non-utility.

Falsifiable Predictions

Falsifiable Predictions (sketch) 1) Enhancing conscious access (without changing stimulus strength) increases subsequent explicit memory strength more than matched unconscious processing. 2) Manipulations that bypass awareness (masked learning, subliminal cueing) improve behavior but produce weaker long-term explicit recall than matched aware trials. 3) Neuromodulatory pulses time-locked to conscious ignition (thalamocortical) predict consolidation gains independent of overt attention. 4) Training protocols that maximize conscious noticing (salience-driven tagging) reshape later unconscious choice policies—measurable via drift-diffusion priors—without improving immediate, in-the-moment control.

References

References (selected)
• Budson AE, Richman KA, Kensinger EA (2022). Consciousness as a Memory System. Cognitive and Behavioral Neurology, 35(4), 263–297. doi:10.1097/WNN.0000000000000319
• Blumenfeld H (2021/2023). Brain Mechanisms of Conscious Awareness: Detect, Pulse, Switch, and Wave. The Neuroscientist. PMID:34632846
• Lacalli T (2024). The function(s) of consciousness: an evolutionary perspective. Frontiers in Psychology, 15, 1493423. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1493423
• Keppler J (2020). The Common Basis of Memory and Consciousness. Frontiers in Psychology, 10:2968.
• Richter-Levin G, Akirav I (2003). Emotional tagging of memory formation. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 7(9): 439–442.